

JAZZ REVIEW

Marsalis and His Russian Counterpart

By BEN RATLIFF

Jazz suggests a spectrum of artistic dispositions, and musicians all over the world take from it whatever suits their own temperaments. Some choose vulnerability. Some choose concentration. Some choose restlessness. And some, like the Russian saxophonist Igor Butman, choose invincibility.

Mr. Butman occupies a position in Russia roughly comparable to that of Wynton Marsalis, the artistic director of Jazz at Lincoln Center. He is an adaptable, highly skilled practitioner, and jazz's most appealing popularizer there. Born the same year as Mr. Marsalis, 1961, he studied at Berklee College of Music in Boston during his late 20's and lived in New York briefly before returning to Russia. There he has led a big band, owned a Moscow jazz club and acted as host of a television program.

The two musicians have played together a number of times in Russia, and to open a new season of Jazz at Lincoln Center concerts with an international theme, Mr. Marsalis invited Mr. Butman's entire big band

to play alongside his own at Alice Tully Hall.

That's literally alongside: two big bands on one stage, set up as mirror images. On Thursday night, the bands occasionally played at the same time, but more often passed the music back and forth. It was a neat trick, and clearly they had had enough rehearsal time to make it work. (The concert will be repeated tonight.)

As an improviser, Mr. Butman is as much of a crowd-pleaser as Mr. Marsalis: he stormed through his brawny post-bop solos, even on his slow ballad "Nostalgia," showing a magnetic confidence. But Mr. Marsalis also plays with idiosyncrasy and a stubborn humor; Mr. Butman held his in check. Introducing a piece called, in English translation, "Waterskis," he explained that jazz musicians in Russia of his generation hadn't absorbed a lot of jazz from television cartoon themes. (The piece he went on to play was an arrangement of one: a careening tone poem.) And in his case, at least, you could understand their appeal, because some-

thing of the tenacious, all-out entertainment aesthetic from 60's television pervaded his music.

It was a show of great competence and fluency: a couple of the Russian band's star musicians, including the baritone saxophonist Alexander Dovgopoly and the trumpeter Artem Kovalchuk, played beautiful, hard-charging solos, thoroughly within the time, tonality and gestural language of mainstream, postwar big bands. This was dense, well-wrought music: the moody harmonic motion of the reed section within the larger group, in Vitaly Dolgov's arrangement of Tchaikovsky's "Waltz of the Flowers," sounded like Ellington ideas embedded within the hard, brassy shell of Maynard Ferguson's big band.

Though Russian folk melodies were used in two numbers, no rustic qualities remained; these were jump-jet versions, with dueling soloists from each band pitted against each other, each one standing on his own side amid his seated colleagues, like opposite goal posts. This sort of thing was nicely done: toward the end of



Jack Vartoogian for The New York Times

The Russian bandleader Igor Butman, left, with Wynton Marsalis.

Ellington's up-tempo blues "Ready, Go," the two tenor saxophonists from each band stood up and began improvising collectively, slowly increasing the intensity, with nothing to back them but the band and audience clapping. The audience gave them what they were looking for.